



WALT WHITMAN  
QUARTERLY REVIEW

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Volume 32

Number 3 ( 2015)

*Special Focus: Whitman and Twentieth-Century  
Writers*

pps. 151-153

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## Gerhardt, Christine, A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World

James Perrin Warren

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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### Recommended Citation

Warren, James Perrin. "Gerhardt, Christine, A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 32 (2015), 151-153. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2154>

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## REVIEWS

CHRISTINE GERHARDT. *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. xiii + 268 pp.

This excellent critical study is a new addition to the Iowa Whitman Series, and it adds luster to an already bright list of books. As the acknowledgments state, Christine Gerhardt has learned to read Whitman with, among others, Walter Grünzweig, Jimmie Killingsworth, and Ed Folsom, and the arguments of *A Place for Humility* clearly create a place for her work among the very best Whitman scholarship and writing. A number of accomplishments support this high praise. First, this study advances Whitman criticism by reading Whitman's poetry with an ecocritical eye, following in the tracks of Killingsworth's *Walt Whitman and the Earth* and developing concrete, insightful discussions of place. Second, and perhaps more effectively, it reads Whitman in the light of Emily Dickinson's nature poetry, creating often brilliant conjunctions between their poems and visions. Third, it sets the poetry of Whitman and Dickinson in the context of nineteenth-century environmental thought, using salient passages from Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin, Edward Hitchcock, George Perkins Marsh, Henry David Thoreau, Susan Fenimore Cooper, Celia Thaxter, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Wilson Flagg in order to show how Dickinson and Whitman "talk back" to the environmental writers of their day. In addition, Gerhardt strategically uses the major scholars of environmental thought to bolster her accounts, so that Laura Dassow Walls and Donald Worster, among many others, play an important role. Fourth, it carefully presents readings of Dickinson and Whitman by engaging with the relevant literary scholarship, reaching back to Gay Wilson Allen and bringing the discussion up to the present. Fifth, it presents an overarching argument about "environmental humility" as a subtle way of discussing the dynamics of ecocentric and anthropocentric positions regarding humanity and nature. With this idea of humility, Gerhardt seeks to avoid the binary opposition of the two centrisms and, moreover, to join the nineteenth century to the present. Finally, it makes all of these arguments in a clear, jargon-free prose style that is often a real pleasure to read.

The geographical and ecological concept of scale is of fundamental importance to the structure of Gerhardt's book. The four parts of the book examine four levels of scale: micro, local, regional, and global. Each part presents a brief introduction to the topics involved in the specific scale at which Dickinson and Whitman are working. For instance, the first part uses Dickinson's herbarium in order to introduce the concept of "small nature," the near-at-hand and easily overlooked minor flora and fauna, and to suggest that both Dickinson and Whitman approach the mass of minutiae by creating moments of awareness rather than a lasting knowledge or control of nature (25-30). Then Gerhardt presents a pair of chapters, one on Dickinson and one on Whitman, to develop in more detail the readings that result from the particular scale she investigates.

In Part I, "Noticing Small Worlds," the paired chapters are especially keen in close readings of Dickinson's poems and then in relating those poems to Whitman's poetry. As a close reader, Gerhardt is balanced, generous, and sharply intelligent. She picks up details and turns them to account in sometimes surprising ways. The first reading of the book, of Dickinson's "Our little Kinsmen – after Rain," treats worms in relation to Marsh's discussion of "Utility of Insects and Worms," suggesting that the poem itself becomes an act of noticing the rarely noticed. This close reading then establishes terms for briefer treatments and broader syntheses of other Dickinson texts. As the chapter develops, Gerhardt cites a number of poetic modes and strategies—flower poems, riddle poems, personification, identification, dissociation/distance, speaker as child—that portray Dickinson's micro-level attention as a form of environmental humility and an eco-ethical stance she consciously assumes. The following chapter on Whitman treats Section 6 of "Song of Myself" as the "originating moment of noticing small nature," and Whitman's provisional but copious responses to the child's question (*What is the grass?*) become, in Gerhardt's reading, a primary example of environmental humility. Moreover, Gerhardt is especially persuasive in reading the section "up and against related notions of women's supposedly appropriate interest in nature's small things." By bringing Whitman into the light shed by Dickinson, Gerhardt illuminates new ways of reading the two poets together, rather than simply in opposition to one another. In the synthetic readings of the chapter, Gerhardt links several passages of "Song of Myself" through the grass image, and she uses the dynamic of identification/dissociation to explore "There Was a Child Went Forth." Because of the previous Dickinson discussion, the treatment of Whitman's "small nature" gains depth and resonance. Part I of *A Place for Humility* is, in short, superb.

Part I establishes the recurring structural pattern for all four parts of the book: introduction, Dickinson chapter, Whitman chapter. In most cases, moreover, the same kinds of illuminating new perspectives emerge from the rich juxtaposition and connection of the two writers, seen in the context of nineteenth-century environmental prose writers. Thus, in Part II, "Describing Local Lands," the readings of familiar major poems like "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as examples of Whitman working at a local scale are intriguing, especially when they open up to such a question as "What happens when we consider 'Lilacs' as a 'multilocal' poem?" For both Dickinson and Whitman, description becomes a primary strategy for exploring the local and "performing humility in the act of speaking."

Each part adds to the argument, so that each treatment of a new level of scale adds dimension and depth to the sense of "a place for humility" in Dickinson and Whitman. This cumulative argument can be quite powerful, and it is always suggestive. In Part III, "Narrating the Regions," Gerhardt raises the vital question of human labor in relation to the land. For Dickinson, the result is a series of reluctant New England farm narratives, some of which also explore the tensions inherent in the elements of nostalgia and class. For Whitman, on the other hand, the regions expand to include most

of the continent, and the narratives he tells in such poems as “Song of the Redwood Tree” can become disturbingly affirmative. Gerhardt works hard to read that poem sympathetically, but it remains a difficult poem to provide with a green reading. While the questions of labor and economic exploitation of natural resources are vital in both poets’ work, this part of Gerhardt’s argument concerning humility is less persuasive than Parts I and II. One reason seems to be that the Dickinson chapter does not resonate strongly in the Whitman chapter, perhaps because the two poets are most different from one another on the regional scale. Or could it be that, on the regional scale, Whitman is not humble?

In Part IV, “Envisioning the Earth,” Dickinson comes back in a powerful way. Gerhardt’s reading of “The Sun went down – no Man looked on—” elicits a set of overlapping ideas that make the place of humility both local and global, human and nonhuman, personal and personifying. Even though the chapter on Whitman’s global poems like “Passage to India” and “Salut au Monde” has to admit the limits of the cosmic imagination—even Humboldt’s—Whitman’s visionary poetry of the cosmos finds a peculiar resonance in Dickinson’s environmental humility.

Finally, Gerhardt’s readings of Dickinson and Whitman are at their strongest when she is focusing her sharp eye on the details of the poems themselves, just as her treatment of thinkers like Humboldt, Marsh, and Thoreau is grounded most solidly in the close reading of specific, salient passages. Always respectful of previous scholarship and criticism, Gerhardt brings an important new perspective to the two greatest poets of nineteenth-century America. Her view opens new possibilities of reading, renewing the vision of both the poets and their readers. Along the way, she suggests new paths for reading Dickinson and Whitman in concert with Humboldt, Darwin, Thoreau, Cooper, and many others.

*Washington and Lee University*

JAMES PERRIN WARREN

JUSTIN MARTIN. *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2014. xi + 339 pp.

In *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians*, Justin Martin aims to convey to his readers what he calls the “aliveness” of the “cast of long-lost artists” who formed the first self-proclaimed group of American bohemians in antebellum New York. In this group biography—based on Martin’s research and his interpretation of correspondence between and newspaper accounts about the American bohemians, among other primary sources—he reconstructs the lives of some of the most talented and eccentric American bohemians who gathered at Charles Pfaff’s restaurant and lager bier saloon, primarily between the years of 1859 and 1862, when the establishment was located at 647 Broadway. Martin devotes considerable time and space to narrating the stories of editor and King of Bohemia Henry Clapp, Jr.; actress and writer